

At War (NYTimes.com)  
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## Interpreters' Accomplishments Fail To Translate Into Visas

By Nataly Kelly

On the battlefield, individuals with language skills are rare and highly prized. <sup>3</sup>Your interpreter is way more important than your weapon,<sup>2</sup> explained Cory Schulz, an Army major embedded with Afghan troops. Indeed, an adept interpreter can help a soldier avoid the need to use a weapon in the first place. An interpreter in the field not only translates sentences from one language into another, but can help identify a local accent or tell soldiers what the graffiti on a wall means while peering out of a moving vehicle. Small actions like these, while not technically even part of the interpreter<sup>1</sup>s job description, often protect troops by keeping them out of harm<sup>1</sup>s way.

However, interpreters do not always receive a similar level of protection from the militaries they serve. They soon become prime targets for death threats and assassination attempts. Interpreters in Iraq were 10 times more likely to be killed than the American troops they supported. Accurate numbers of interpreters killed in battle in both wars are difficult to obtain, but most sources agreed that at least 300 were killed in Iraq, and at least 80 in Afghanistan. When the soldiers go home, interpreters and their families often have no choice but to flee, becoming refugees or asylum seekers. A visa can make the difference between life and death.

Visa policies vary significantly from one country to the next. New Zealand, which deployed only 145 troops to Afghanistan, resettled 23 interpreters and 50 dependents. Denmark sent just 545 troops to Iraq, but the country gave asylum to 120 military interpreters plus family members. Canada, which sent 3,000 troops to Afghanistan, granted 550 visas to interpreters.

By comparison, the United States sent more than two million troops to Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2007 and 2008, a special immigrant visa program was created to allow Iraqi and Afghan interpreters to receive visas. The number of visas was limited to 500 per year, but was reduced to just 50 per year starting in 2009. So, a total of 1,200 visas were authorized under this program from 2007 through 2012. Visas can be obtained under other programs, but an enormous backlog of interpreters still waits to receive an answer.

Meanwhile, language-skilled individuals are in high demand and low supply in the United States. Many government agencies face a severe shortage of skilled linguists for <sup>3</sup>critical languages,<sup>2</sup> those deemed important for defense and intelligence activities. These languages include Arabic, a dialect of which is spoken in Iraq, and Pashto and Dari, which are spoken in Afghanistan.

The government<sup>1</sup>s lack of translators is longstanding. On September 10, 2001, Al Qaeda operatives warned, <sup>3</sup>Tomorrow is zero hour,<sup>2</sup> and <sup>3</sup>The match is about to begin.<sup>2</sup> It is not clear whether these intercepted messages, which were spoken in Arabic, were a reference to the impending attacks. But regardless, they were not

translated until September 12. Similarly, the F.B.I. failed to review 7.2 million files collected by counterterrorism investigators from 2006 to 2008, due in great part to a lack of translation resources.

Government agencies continue to struggle to find enough people who can teach critical languages to diplomats, translate documents, and even do monolingual work like scanning news media or listening to recordings in another language for intelligence purposes. The agencies face several barriers. The number of candidates who speak these languages and live in the United States is limited. Military contractors can offer higher salaries to language-skilled workers, leaving the government with even fewer potential recruits. Many people cannot obtain the required security clearances, and not everyone wants to relocate or work for the Defense Department.

In short, the government has reduced the number of visas for interpreters who are skilled in some of the very languages it requires for national security but cannot successfully recruit from its existing population. President Obama plans to overhaul the immigration system in the coming months. The new legislation reportedly will enable <sup>3</sup>highly skilled foreigners<sup>2</sup> to remain in the country.

But will the list of desired skills include language skills? The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics has data showing that translation and interpreting are among the fastest-growing professions in the country. The language services market supports not only government agencies, but the manufacturing and automotive sectors, the health care industry and many other important areas of the economy.

Many military interpreters have language skills that could instantly be put to use here at home in the public and private sectors. Granted, not every interpreter in Iraq or Afghanistan is perfectly bilingual. Most never had the opportunity to perfect their skills in an English-speaking country. However, even in the cases of interpreters with relatively limited English, it would likely be faster to help them improve their basic English than to teach an Anglophone to speak Arabic or Dari from scratch.

Not all interpreters deserve visas. There have been several cases of interpreters who misrepresented their abilities or even lied about the languages they spoke, putting troops<sup>1</sup> lives at risk. Others have been guilty of abandoning troops, stealing and other charges. However, there are thousands of interpreters out there who served bravely alongside American troops and who do deserve visas. Their lives were at risk when they served, and they remain at risk today.

Helping those interpreters is simply the right thing to do, but adding more language-skilled individuals to the American workforce would also benefit our government and economy. The wars in which we are engaged today and the battlefields on which we carry them out are changing. If anything, the need for linguistic preparedness is only intensifying. For that very reason, perhaps if we pay closer attention to our country's language strategy and create immigration policies that support it, those interpreters and translators can prevent us from getting into situations where we need to use weapons in the first place just as they do on the battlefield.

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